

Mule Deer Initiative Overview and Activities through August 2010

This Mule Deer Initiative (MDI) Plan (Plan) outlines the issues associated with the decline of mule deer numbers in Oregon and develops strategies to reverse that trend. The goal is to increase mule deer numbers in five Wildlife Management Units (WMUs) to the established population Management Objectives (MOs).

The MDI was initiated in July 2008 during a meeting with all Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (department) wildlife biologists. Since that time department biologists, with the help of local Action Plan committees from each WMU, developed draft action plans for each WMU. Action Plan Committees consisted of representatives of hunting associations, landowners and producers, land management agencies, state agencies, and county government. Each action plan was developed during several Committee meetings.

The MDI Plan includes a description of the MDI process, a brief history of mule deer in Oregon; a discussion of limiting factors associated with declines in mule deer, and management considerations. The Plan then addresses the specific situation in each of five WMUs (Heppner, Maury, Murderers Creek, Steens Mountain, and Warner) and actions the department may take in addressing the problem in each unit.

The Plan establishes six objectives for each WMU, as well as multiple strategies to help achieve those objectives. The objectives and strategies seek to improve conditions for mule deer resulting in populations increasing to MOs. For each WMU the six objectives address; 1) habitat improvement strategies 2) predation, 3) disturbance/harassment, 4) law enforcement, 5) disease, and 6) population management.

The Plan includes strategies for improving the statistical reliability of harvest information needed to better determine the deer population in each WMU and measure any changes associated with strategies implemented through this plan. While objectives and strategies for the five units identify many actions that could be taken to benefit mule deer, actual accomplishments will depend on funding and department prioritization.

All management activities will be carried out in an adaptive management approach that allows for monitoring, evaluation, and changes in management based on results. Those strategies that are not successful at meeting stated objectives will be modified or discontinued; only those activities that have a beneficial effect will be continued. Several factors will be used to determine success. Deer herd statistics, such as fawn and buck ratios and population trend; and harvest statistics such as hunter harvest and success, will continue to be collected. However, some collection techniques may be changed to improve data precision. The department will apply knowledge gained from work done under the MDI to other mule deer units in Oregon.

Maury WMU

Habitat Management

- Geographic Information System (GIS) habitat inventory mapping for the entire Maury WMU is completed.
- Coordinating with NRCS, OSU Extension, BLM, Deschutes Watershed Basin Plan, OWEB, and USFS in developing potential habitat projects and modifying projects underway to benefit mule deer. Potential funding and habitat projects have been given high priority to the Maury WMU as a result of the MDI efforts.
- Purchased 70 acres (1,000 pounds) dry-land seed to enhance important mule deer wintering areas.
- Purchased 150 pounds of Native Grass Mix.
- Purchased 2.5 miles of fence to protect aspen stands and important wetlands and watering site on summer range.
- Purchased 6 road closure gates to restrict motorized travel in important mule deer wintering areas.
- Completed a 20 acre fencing project on private land to protect important wetland and fawning/rearing area.
- Seeded 40 acres of dry-land seed mix on private land to improve forage for mule deer.
- 120 pounds of un-cleaned bitterbrush seed was collected from the Maury WMU.
- Restored 3 aspen sites (15 acres total) through conifer removal and fencing.
- Relocated a spring from inside an aspen grove to another area to avoid impacts by cattle and big game.
- Approval for 1,100 acres of juniper thinning, 4 spring developments, and replacement of 3 miles of riparian fencing. Work will begin in September of 2010 with completion by June 2011.

Law Enforcement

- A 2009 OSP Action Plan was developed for the Maury WMU.
- A second OSP Fish & Game position was approved for the Prineville OSP District. Two new positions were identified in Department's 2009-2011 budget packet, however conversations with OSP have indicated that efforts with Maury MDI has prompted one of the new positions remain in Prineville.
- Doubling the Turn-In-Poacher reward money to informants for reporting any game crimes in Maury WMU was approved by OHA.

Population Management

- The Maury WMU post hunting season buck escapement was raised from 15 bucks/100 does to 20 bucks/100 does for 2009 (approved by Division). As a result, rifle buck tags were decreased from 821 to 385 for 2009 hunting season (approved by the Commission). LOP tags proposed to be reduced by same percent as public tags by 2010.
- Limited entry archery buck deer seasons in Maury WMU (approved by Division), proposed at June Commission meeting, approved in October 2009 for 2010 season.
- A new population model effort is underway (SAK model) to determine reliable mule deer population estimates in the Maury WMU for 2010. Teeth will be collected from

harvested bucks. OHA is offering a \$900 rifle as an incentive for hunters to participate in the Maury WMU questionnaire and tooth collection efforts.

- The SAK model will be repeated for the 2010 season with OHA, Prineville Chapter donating another rifle.
- Quadrat surveys were conducted in 2010 with plan to repeat in 2011.
- Deer archery season went to a controlled season with 50% tag reduction in 2010.
- LOP tags were reduced by 50% for the 2010 season.

Steens Mountain WMU

Population Management

- A historical preseason buck trend route is being conducted (end of August) to establish baseline information, as well as for comparison to past surveys. This survey has been conducted only periodically in recent years.
- Limited entry archery buck deer seasons in Steens Mountain WMU (approved by Division), proposed at June Commission meeting, final approval in October.
- ODFW staff conducted in field hunter harvest surveys during opening week of deer rifle season.
- Quadrat surveys were conducted in the Steens unit and Trout Creek Mountains during late winter 2010 with plans to repeat the surveys in 2011.

Law Enforcement

- A 2009 OSP Action Plan was developed for Steens Mountain WMU.
- Increased presence of Department and OSP personnel during the 2009 pronghorn season.
- Doubling the Turn-In-Poacher reward money to informants for reporting game crimes in Steens Mountain WMU was approved by OHA.
- OSP staff increased patrols in the Steens Mountain WMU during opening week of deer rifle season.

Habitat Management

- Discussing BLM's wild horse policy with BLM staff to help resolve issues.
- Coordinated with BLM regarding ongoing juniper management activities in the Steens Mountain WMU to conserve mature sagebrush stands with minor juniper encroachment while adjacent areas are being burned to remove class 2 or 3 juniper stands.

Disease and Parasites

- ODFW staff collected CWD samples from harvested deer encountered during opening week of rifle deer season.

Predator Management

- Steens Mountain unit has been identified as a Cougar Target Area.

Warner WMU

Habitat Management

- Clover Creek – Snyder Creek Juniper Treatment: Started cutting 5800 acres of juniper in the Clover/Snyder area of north Warner. Cooperative project between BLM, 2 private landowners, Lake County Watershed Council and ODFW. This project started prior to the Warner MDI process and we were having some problems getting commitments for all the needed money to complete. Because of the MDI emphasis we were able to secure some additional dollars to cut the entire area.
- Cutting and post treatments were completed in the Clover Creek – Snyder Creek Juniper Treatment by April, 2010. All treatments were designed to remove juniper from aspen, bitterbrush and mountain big sage brush stands which provide summer and transition habitat for mule deer.
- Contracts are set for 750 acres of juniper removal on 7 landowners in the unit. To date 400 acres have been cut.
- Aspen Stand Inventory: Fremont National Forest and ODFW have been working with a group of high school students from Lane County to inventory aspen stands in the Warner unit. This multi year project is funded through a grant from the Lane County Work Force Partnership to provide students summer jobs in natural resources. The intent is to inventory all aspen stands in the Fremont Forest. The first year of this project was summer 2009. Because of the Warner MDI we had the kids start in south Warner and work into North Warner. The kids are identifying location, size and structure of each aspen stand, and recording amount of conifer encroachment, and other issues. We will use this data to design aspen treatments.
- The Lake County Chapter of OHA and the Lake County RMEF committee heard about the Aspen Stand Inventory project and signed on as cooperators. Aerial inventories have been completed and ground truthing will occur during summer 2011.
- South Warner Juniper: Project area is 4500 acres of BLM and possibly 2000 acres of private land on mule deer winter and transition range. This project is in the planning phase with work scheduled to start during fall of 2010. It is in the vicinity of the Ruby Pipeline corridor and we will use a portion of Ruby's mitigation requirement as leverage dollars on the project. We emphasized this area over some others being considered because of the Warner MDI.
- With authorization of the NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative, we have been able to fund some of the juniper cutting in south Warner. This has allowed us to sign contracts with 4 landowners in north Warner that have good mule deer habitat, but do not meet the requirements of the NRCS program. In south Warner 300 acres have been cut in and 250 acres have been cut in north Warner. Up to 1,000 additional acres of juniper will be cut.
- During the annual ODFW/Fremont Forest Coordination Meeting, staff presented the forest leadership team with a presentation on the Warner MDI then lead a field trip to look at timber stands and discuss treatments that would benefit mule deer and meet forest health needs. We got a commitment to emphasize the Warner unit in planning and stewardship activities. Nothing specific yet but the forest staff are in agreement with what we're trying to do.
- Taylor Ranch Medusa Head: Weed surveys completed by Lake County Cooperative Weed Management personnel identified medusa head rye in the Honey Creek drainage. This is one of two known medusa head infested areas in the Warner Valley watershed.

Two hundred acres have been sprayed with an additional 40 acres to be sprayed in the near future.

Population Management

- During the April-June big game season setting process we reduced tags in the North Warner rifle buck hunt by 50% consistent with the implementation plan.
- Quadrat surveys were conducted in the Warner and Interstate units during late winter 2010 with plans to repeat the surveys in 2011.
- Limited entry archery buck deer seasons were established for the 2010 north and south Warner deer hunts. Opening weekend hunter densities were not substantially different than those observed in the past.

Law Enforcement

- A 2009 OSP Action Plan was developed for Warner WMU.
- Doubling the Turn-In-Poacher reward money to informants for reporting game crimes in Warner WMU was approved by OHA.

Predator Management

- The Warner unit has been identified as a Cougar Target Area. The annual removal goal for the Warner Target Area is 14 cougars/year.
- From January through April of 2010, 6 cougar have been taken by a Bear/Cougar agent. A second bear/cougar agent has recently been authorized. We will attempt to take the other 6 cougar to meet the target area goal during the fall.

Murderers Creek WMU

- Formed local working group. Met a total of 7 times before plan was adopted by the committee.
- Was interviewed for an article for the OHA magazine. Participated in a call in interview on the "Outdoor GPS" radio program to promote the mule deer initiative. Presented information related to the mule deer initiative to the local OHA chapter.
- Attended Deer and Elk workshop in Spokane Washington.
- Steve Allen attended a range workshop in Mitchell, OR titled EBIPM (Ecologically – Based Invasive Plant Management). This workshop directly relates to the annual grass problems that we have on the wildlife area and options that we have to address those problems.

Habitat Management

- Juniper removal on P.W. Schneider Wildlife Area for 2008/2009. John Day district staff and various volunteers cut juniper one day a month for six months. This resulted in the removal of 120 acres of juniper to add to the 194 acres of juniper cut by private contractors. This cost \$29,350 for the mechanical removal (chainsaw) of 314 acres on 8 separate sites. –see *P.W. Schneider juniper removal 2009 annual report*.

- Juniper removal for 2009/2010: In eight months seven sites were cut totaling 991 acres. ODFW employees, volunteers from Trout Unlimited, and FNAWS managed to cut 135 acres and the contract crews laid down the other 856 acres. The total project cost this year was \$90,243.22. – see *P.W. Schneider juniper removal 2010 annual report*
- The Access and Habitat board toured the P.W. Schneider Wildlife area and visited habitat improvement sites. The board was briefed on the MDI program and we are currently in the process of writing a grant to improve habitat on P.W. Schneider to take in front of the board. An Access and Habitat grant application was completed and submitted for review. The grant is asking for \$101,000 of A&H funds to complete juniper treatment on 920 acres of state land on PWSWA. The grant has been approved through the regional council, and now will be considered by the state board on October 20th.
- Food plots have been planted on the wildlife area to improve summer and winter forage for mule deer. Approximately 80 acres of food plots (alfalfa, spring/fall wheat and barley) have been planted on P.W. Schneider.
- Attended the annual meeting of the Society for Range Management conference held in Dayville, OR. Greg and wildlife area staff presented information on the mule deer initiative to the attendees.
- Have worked very closely with the local ODOT maintenance shop to purchase GPS units for ODOT vehicles and GPS units for the two ODFW wildlife vehicles. Beginning Sept. 1 we will begin collecting GPS data on road struck deer and other wildlife. Variable Message Signs will be placed during peak traffic times to alert motorists of deer use along the highway. Data is currently being collected by ODFW and ODOT. Signs were placed on the highway during the start of archery season and the start of buck rifle season. Lower #'s of deer were picked up this season as compared with last (18 struck last year, 1 this year during archery season); however, this may be the result of deer not being low in the valley this summer. Hunters are still observed speeding in the signed corridor (OSP). Collected data will give us more information to make critical management decisions in this highway corridor.
- ODOT and ODFW have collected one year of data recording GPS locations of mule deer vehicle collisions.
- Variable message signs were placed prior to archery season to warn drivers of active wildlife on a 30 mile section of Highway 26.
- Highway 26 through the John Day valley was designated a wildlife safety corridor by the Oregon Legislature and two permanent signs were installed. This was done in memory of long time OHA member, Ray Moles, who worked to promote safety measures to reduce wildlife vehicle collisions.
- Seeded 120 acres of deer winter range on John Morris property to improve forage quality and compete with annual grasses.
- USFS started work on a BMEI juniper thinning project on the Murderers Creek Basin approximately 200 acres will be removed.
- To date, 979 acres of juniper have been cut and piled with an additional 248 to be completed before December. This project's cost is \$254,624.
- An RMEF/A&H grant will implemented this fall to remove 200 acres juniper on deer and elk winter range in the Murderers Creek Basin.
- A DEAR grant was awarded a landowner in the Izee area to combat invasive weed in mule deer winter range.

- Obtained PR funds of \$228,473 to treat encroaching juniper on the wildlife area as well as treating annual grasses with herbicide and seeding treatment areas with beneficial forage species. 900 acres have been flagged and contracts are being prepared to go out on ORPIN for pre-bid tours. Work expected to start in December.

Disturbance/Harassment

- Worked with BLM to implement a closure on the wildlife area for winter of 2011. The wildlife area (state and BLM) will be closed to access from February 1 – April 14. This will keep shed antler hunters from disturbing wintering mule deer during a critical time period.
- Placed 10 signs within the Murderers Creek-Flagtail travel management area (TMA) alerting archery hunters of proposed changes for 2011. Beginning in 2011, the Murderers Creek – Flagtail TMA will be extended to include the closure three days prior to archery season through the archery season. ODFW is also handing out maps, MDI brochures and comment forms to hunters to allow for them to comment on the proposed change. This action was recommended by the MDI committee as a way to reduce disturbance and harassment on public land and increase buck escapement.

Law Enforcement

- A 2009 OSP Action Plan was developed for Murderers Creek WMU.
- Doubling the Turn-In-Poacher reward money to informants for reporting game crimes in Murderers Creek WMU was approved by OHA.

Heppner WMU

Habitat

- Attained final approval to begin State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) program in the unit and working with the Farm Service Agency and interested landowners to start sign up and implementation.
- Working with multiple landowners regarding habitat improvement projects including weed control, aspen management, juniper control, and spring development.
- Working with Pheasants Forever to secure funding for habitat improvement projects to be completed this fall and spring.
- Working with the Forest Service to complete controlled burn in portion of the unit to improve deer forage.
- Working with FSA and NRCS on new CRP signups to improve mule deer habitat in new CRP fields.

Predator Management

- Wildlife Services removed 124 coyotes from the northeast portion of the unit to improve mule deer fawn survival.

Disease

- Sent in fawn to diagnostic lab that was dying of unknown causes for testing.

Law Enforcement

- Secured money and purchased ATV to help OSP patrol winter range closures.
- Increased winter range patrols with OSP and FS to control illegal motorized vehicle use during winter range closure period.

Public Outreach

- Mailed letter to Northern Heppner unit landowners to inform them of the MDI and to educate them on the new SAFE program.
- Gave presentation at annual local Cattleman's Association banquet.

While some of these activities are relatively minor others such as the SAFE program in the Heppner District are more significant. The SAFE program is essentially the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) with the emphasis on providing wildlife habitat rather than soil protection. The Heppner SAFE has 4.9 million dollars available to improve deer habitat on up to 5,500 acres for the next 10-15 years.

The department also committed two biologists to the Mule Deer Initiative to coordinate the development of the individual District Action Plans and hired a biologist temporarily to assist with combining the five District Action Plans into one document and adding background information.

During the 2009 legislative session the department was able to increase the budget support for the Deer Enhancement and Restoration (DEAR) Program and Green Forage Program by a total of \$350,000. Both programs are used to improve habitat to benefit big game species. The DEAR program was created to enhance and restore habitat for mule deer on private and public lands. The objective of the Green Forage Program is to alleviate or prevent big-game damage on private lands while benefiting wildlife by improving forage quality and quantity on nearby public or private lands. The Department will continue to seek additional funding for MDI projects.